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Caitlin Byrne. "Australia's New Colombo Plan: Enhancing regional soft power through student mobility." *International Journal* 71:1 (March 2016): 107-128. DOI: 10.1177/0020702015617786. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0020702015617786>

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Review by **Kadir Ayhan**, Seoul National University

Caitlin Byrne's article evaluates Australia's New Colombo Plan (NCP) as a public diplomacy tool to enhance the country's regional soft power through student mobility. The importance of this article lies in Byrne's analysis of the NCP program as a *distinct* student mobility program. There have been many other student mobility programs in Australia, but what makes NCP distinct, according to Byrne, is that NCP is the first kind of such programs that aims to advance Australia's foreign policy objectives in the Indo-Pacific Region being part of Australia's overall foreign policy agenda (108-9) and being funded, and implemented, by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) (118). It is a very timely argument for those who are interested in the study of public diplomacy. Most recent articles on the topic fail to draw clear boundaries of what qualifies as public diplomacy and what does not. Such ambiguity run the risk of calling every kind of communication involving foreigners public diplomacy. While other student mobility programs such as AsiaBound involved similar international exchanges, Byrne does not recognize such programs as public diplomacy since they are "disconnected from foreign policy ideas" (117). NCP's distinctiveness, that is being linked to Australia's regional foreign policy objectives, created greater "soft power influence" (117) potential while it was "ultimately lacking" (117) in other programs due to their disconnection to foreign policy.

The article consists of three sections. In the first section, Byrne reviews the highly contested soft power and public diplomacy concepts. She finds that Australian government's recently launched 'economic diplomacy' strategy pursues soft power outcomes (111) while student mobility is regarded as public diplomacy to be leveraged for soft power outcomes (113).

In the second section, Byrne analyzes the historical background and evolution of NCP and concludes that NCP is distinct from its predecessors and other similar student mobility programs. NCP was based on Minister for Foreign Affairs Julie Bishop's foreign policy strategy which is designed around the argument that the more influence Australia has in the Indo-Pacific region, the higher Australia's strength and reputation in the world (107-8). Byrne points out NCP's commitment to engagement of various stakeholders both home and abroad and partnership building to realize the "collaborative potential of public diplomacy" referring to

‘collaboration’ as a “public diplomacy measure in itself” (118, see also 122, 123). For Byrne, this potential could be realized once NCP became part of the foreign affairs portfolio.

In the third section, Byrne reflects on the insights of the stakeholders of the NCP program. She also divides the challenges and opportunities of the NCP as public diplomacy into three main categories. First, Byrne finds a strategic coherence and bipartisan support among different sectors including the international education, foreign policy and industry in Australia in the sense that student mobility is regarded as an opportunity to enhance engagement in the region. This coherence led to fruitful collaboration both among different sectors within Australia and with overseas partners. Second, Byrne attracts attention to the coordinator role of DFAT in the NCP network. Reflecting the concerns of practitioners in the field, Byrne calls for sustainable network engagement to make sure the needs of all stakeholders including students, universities, businesses, and communities are addressed. Third, and most importantly, she recommends designing both a program-level evaluation mechanism for the NCP and evaluation of NCP’s overall impact of soft power of Australia in the region.

Byrne’s article analyzes the NCP as a distinct public diplomacy tool and its role in enhancing Australia’s regional soft power. The article establishes the linkages between the NCP as a public diplomacy tool and regional soft power of Australia. Furthermore, it explores various aspects of the program, bringing them to the attention of interested researchers and makes recommendations for future research. However, as Byrne acknowledges, her article falls short of in-depth analysis of any aspect of the NCP. Nevertheless, this initial exploration shows the feasibility of more extensive research on the NCP¹ and sets the foundation for “greater insights based on cumulative knowledge”² on two topics: the NCP as a public diplomacy tool to enhance Australia’s regional soft power; and an international-relations perspective on the student mobility programs. Further research on these two topics must follow in order to shed light on these rather less researched areas of public diplomacy and student mobility programs. Furthermore, either Byrne or other researchers should respond to Byrne’s call for creating an integrated evaluation framework for both program-level outcomes of the NCP and its impact on Australia’s regional soft power. Without such evaluation frameworks, the outcomes of the NCP and other similar programs will be limited to the “stories” (115) and episodes which fall short of showing the full picture.

Kadir Ayhan currently works as a lecturer at Seoul National University Graduate School of International Studies where he completed his Ph.D. He is also Executive Director of a Seoul-based NGO called Hangang Network. His main research interests include public diplomacy and NGOs. Ayhan is the co-author of the works *Korea in the World: Promoting Mutual Understanding and Global Partnerships* (Seoul: Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Ewha, 2014) and *Country Comparisons of Social Policies and Social Integration: The Case of Asian Countries 1 (Turkey)* (Seoul: Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs, 2012).

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¹ Earl Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*, 12th ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth, Thomson Learning Inc., 2010), 92.

² Robert K. Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish* (New York: Guilford Publications, 2011), 296-297